

# Defining a “Sikh”: Tracing the Historic Foundations of Sikh Identity

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## I. Introduction

The issue of defining Sikh Identity has been a topic of much debate in modern Sikh scholarship. Clearly, Sikhs today form a unique and distinct community with a separate identity, but has this always been the case? Many scholars argue that different Sikh identities existed within the Panth until the latter part of the 19th century and all made an equally legitimate claim to being “Sikh”. This paper argues that the proposed fluid nature of Sikh identity is not evident if early Sikh textual sources are examined. Three distinct periods significant to the study of Sikh identity are from the time of Guru Nanak to the birth of the Khalsa in 1699, the early Khalsa period until the first half of the 18th century and then finally the Sikh Kingdoms until the Singh Sabha. By examining early Sikh identity in these three periods, it becomes clear that Sikhs indeed formed a distinct community with unique customs and practices and this distinctiveness persisted strongly until the latter half of the 18th century. At this point however, various factors triggered by the formation of the Sikh Kingdoms resulted in a weakening of the boundaries between Hindus and Sikhs and the adoption of many Hindu customs. The Singh Sabha, far from “creating” a Sikh tradition, was thus a revivalist movement in the sense that it sought to purge the Sikhs of many outside influences and re-solidify previously existing boundaries.

An examination of some prior work on the topic of Sikh identity shows that many scholars hold that Sikh identity as it exists today was constructed by the Singh Sabha elites in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Perhaps Harjot Oberoi presents the most controversial stand on Sikh identity. Oberoi holds that Sikhs were not separate from the Hindu community and shared a common “territory, language, rites de passage, dietary taboos, festivals...”. Furthermore, the “[e]arly-period Sikh tradition did not show much concern for establishing distinct religious boundaries” and the Singh Sabha reformers created Sikh life rituals which were specifically designed to differentiate the Sikhs from the Hindus. “The ‘invented tradition’ made it possible for the Sikh public to think, imagine and speak in terms of a universal community of believers united by uniform rites, symbols and scripture” Richard Fox holds a similar belief and states that

“[t]hose who labelled themselves ‘Sikh’ in the nineteenth century embraced no single cultural meaning, religious identity or social practice...Therefore, long standing widely shared and consistent Sikh cultural principles cannot explain why the Third Sikh War [Gurdwara Reform Movement] was fought on the basis of Singh identity and over Sikh institutions. In fact, no such tradition existed”

McLeod takes a less radical stance and simply outlines what he believes is the gradual evolution of Sikh identity, which finally crystallised, largely due to the Singh Sabha movement with Khalsa identity emerging dominant and “distinguished by a new consistency and a new clarity of definition.”

## II. The Use of the Historical/Western Approach in Studying the Sikh Tradition

Before an examination of the issue of Sikh identity can take place, it is important to first acknowledge the limitations of the historical, and specifically Western approach to studying the Sikh tradition. Noel Q. King holds the view that using methods of scholarship developed for

Christianity and Judaism on other religions, is dangerous. This observation, of course, is very much linked to the debate of Orientalism: a western ethnocentrism that sees the norm as being the West and all other traditions are judged by those standards and considered mutations of the same. In the Sikh tradition, a major method of transmitting history and tradition is oral. This is not acceptable for scholars who would use the Western approach: a codified, written account is needed. A good example of this conflict can be seen in the examinations of the Rehitnama literature. Although rehit is considered to be a comprehensive guide to the Khalsa code of conduct, it was often written as a supplementary guide to the Rehit outlined by the initiating Punj Pyaaray in the Khanday kee Paahul ceremony. Desa Singh writes in the seventh stanza of his rehitnama, "that rehit which the five utter, keep that steadfast in your mind" and later in the ninth stanza writes "that is the first rehit, the one which the five Singhs said in the Paahul ceremony. The other different rehits which are spoken of, that is which I will go on to explain ". Clearly the written rehit is secondary to the one which was orally elucidated by the Punj Pyaaray. Even to this day, many Sikh groups i.e. Akhand Kirtanee Jatha, keep the rehit and the gurmaatra secret and a guard is posted at the doors of Paahul ceremonies to maintain secrecy. The rehit is passed down orally through generations or "seena-baseena" and the newly initiated are instructed to carefully listen and remember the rehit so that they too may pass it down. The modern day "Sikh Rehit Maryada" which was created in the first half of the twentieth century is in fact a western document which is formally codified in prose with sections and subsections and is not in any way a "traditional" Sikh document. Similarly, King argues that classifying Sikh documents such as the Janamsakhis under western categories i.e. that of biography is also problematic. Janamsakhis are not biographies, but in fact a category unto themselves. Thus, attempting to analyse and understand the Sikh tradition with a west-centric view is difficult and prone to error, but working within these parameters, this paper will attempt to examine the historical basis of Sikh identity.

### **III. Early Sikh Identity**

Anthony Smith when explaining the establishment of "ethnic identities" refers to six foundations of ethnic identity: a name for the group, belief of common ancestry, presence of historical memories, shared culture, attachment to a specific territory and a sense of common solidarity . These guidelines are useful in an examination of the early Sikh community to see the extent to which the Sikhs were a distinct ethnic group.

The Sikh Gurus, from the time of Guru Nanak attempted to create a unique community of believers who would live a lifestyle independent from the faiths around them. Guru Nanak criticised the religious practices he saw around him, declaring, "[t]he Hindus die worshipping, worshipping the idols and the Muslims die bowing their heads. The former burn the dead and the latter bury them. None of the two finds the real state O Lord! " Guru Nanak and his successors rejected many common religious and cultural rituals such as belief in salvation through pilgrimage, ritual cleanliness, idol worship, caste, sati and asceticism . As opposed to the prevalent custom of pursuing spirituality in solitary seclusion, Guru Nanak advocated the necessity of congregation or sangat and established communities of Sikhs. Bhai Gurdas, the nephew of the third Guru and close associate of the subsequent gurus, describes how the "Gursikhs" meet daily in the congregation at the dharamsalas to sing Sodar and Sohila and "heartily associate with one another." Guru Nanak also established what Bhai Gurdas describes as a type of Sachkhand (realm of truth) on earth in the form of Kartarpur. Kartarpur was the first of many towns established by the Sikh gurus which were "inhabited by the holy congregation."

As the Sikh community grew, subsequent gurus also introduced distinct features to the Panth.

Guru Angad developed the Gurmukhi script for use by the Sikhs. Separate Sikh festivals of Baisakhi and Divali were celebrated at the sacred Baulee of Goindvaal. Distinct life cycles too had begun to evolve in the Panth. This is illustrated by the account of Guru Amar Das's death by Baba Sundar in Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji. Guru Amar Das instructs the Sikhs to not weep after him, as was the custom and furthermore says "do not bother with offering rice-\*\*\*\*\* on leaves, lighting lamps, and other rituals like floating the body out on the Ganges." All these instructions were clearly in opposition to the traditional death rituals of the Hindus.

The Sikh identity emerged even more strongly by the time of the fourth Guru. Guru Ram Das "composed the wedding hymn (Lavan) for the solemnisation of Sikh marriage" as well as hymns to be sung upon the arrival of the groom at the bride's house. Guru Ram Das also outlined the conduct of one who could be called a Sikh of the Guru: she rises early, bathes, meditates upon the naam and at daybreak begins to sing Gurbani. The Sikhs now had a distinct code of conduct. Guru Arjan continued the process of giving the Sikhs life cycle rituals. Guru Arjan composed hymns that would be sung at the birth of a child and according to some, made reference to the singing of the Anand upon such a joyous occasion.

Also under Guru Arjan, the Sikhs had developed a virtual capital in the form of Ramdasapur, which also housed the Harimandir, the central Sikh shrine. Both places are celebrated in various hymns in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, with Ramdasapur being particularly characterised as the ideal city. With the compilation of the Adi Granth by Guru Arjan, the Sikhs finally had a central scripture, which included a liturgy and could officially be considered a people of the word or a textual community. It was at this point that Guru Arjan could unambiguously declare "I do not go on pilgrimage to Mecca nor bathe at the Hindu holy places...to the formless One I bow in my heart. I am neither Hindu nor Muslim" Oberoi argues that this hymn was in response to an older verse by Kabir and "is only reinforcing Kabir's thought" which followed the Sant tradition of rejecting traditional orthodoxies. Pashaura Singh refutes this argument and argues that this hymn was used to clarify Kabir's beliefs and declare independence from both the Muslim and Hindu identities.

Besides the words of the gurus to provide insight into what it meant to be "Sikh", the vaars of Bhai Gurdas also outline many distinct features of Sikh identity. Bhai Gurdas makes it clear in his vaars that the disciples of Guru Nanak are the "Gursikhs" who follow a distinct way of life. Bhai Gurdas reiterates the conduct of the Gursikhs, who wake "early in the morning" and meditate upon the mul mantra and gurmantra, followed by a recitation of Japji. Later they go to the congregation of other Gursikhs and sing Gurbani. The Gursikhs celebrate the anniversaries of the gurus. Amongst the followers of the Gurus, Bhai Gurdas records a mixture of all the castes who are all considered equal in the eyes of Guru Nanak and God. Furthermore the "Goddess and gods are neither served nor worshipped" by the Gursikhs, who also place no faith in omens such as "the twelve signs of the zodiac, incantations, magic...lunar and week days," etc. This clearly is a break from the common culture of the Punjab at the time. The Gursikhs had a separate initiation ceremony or the Charan-Amrit, where the Guru's feet were washed and the water drunk by the new Sikhs. Bhai Gurdas goes further and says "Hindus and Muslims have started two separate ways...they all are not equal to even one hair of a Guru's Sikh, who has effaced his sense of ego" Also, "the Guru has created the mighty Gurmukh Panth. This Panth keeps itself away from the boundaries of the Vedas and the Semitic scriptures..." There appears to be a clear distinction between the Gursikhs and the other communities and the presence of a separate Sikh identity.

Another important feature of the Vaars of Bhai Gurdas, is the condemnation of heretic sects which originated from the Sikhs. True Gursikhs recognise the authentic lineage and unity in spirit of all

the gurus from Guru Nanak to Guru Hargobind. Followers of other gurus are false and mislead. The followers of Prithi Chand, the Meenas (scoundrels), are particularly condemned for much of the 36th vaar. The “faces of the Meenas are blackened”, “the way of the brazen faced Meenas leads towards hell”. All other pretenders to the Guruship are also condemned: “those who without merit call themselves Guru, are sluggish dissemblers.” All these references clearly refute Oberoi who claims that “the history of Sikh tradition is radically different from, say, early Christianity which from the very beginning had a dominant concern with demarcating believers and non believers...Such modes of exclusion, of publicising the boundaries of belief and practice were quite alien to early Sikh tradition” Even Guru Angad, in what is a clear reference to Sri Chand and his followers wrote, “What kind of gift is this that one gives to oneself? The true gift is that which is received by serving the Master to his satisfaction.” The Sikhs had sufficient boundaries to exclude deviant/heretic sects from the community and furthermore condemned them as illegitimate pretenders.

An independent source that collaborates much of Bhai Gurdas’s writings on the Sikhs is the Dabistan-i-Mazahib. Dabistan was written around 1645 as an account of various religions and gives a separate chapter to the Nanak Panthis or “GuruSikhs”. Dabistan presents the Sikhs as a unique community who “do not believe in images or idol-temples” and clearly presents the Sikhs as separate from the Muslims and the Hindus:

“To be brief, Nanak’s followers scorn images. Their belief is that all Gurus are Nanak...They do not recite the mantras of the Hindus and do not pay respect to their idol-temples. They do not count the avtaras for anything. They do not have any attachment to Sanskrit, which the Hindus call the language of angels”.

One masand, Debi Chand, is described as being so strict that “neither a Hindu nor Muslim can approach him”. Although this is clearly not a common or even acceptable Sikh practice, it shows that clear boundaries existed between the “believers” or Gursikhs and the other communities.

The author of Dabistan also confirms other distinct features of Sikh identity i.e. the rejection of the caste system, the commemoration of Baisakhi, etc. There are also references to the Minas who are condemned by the Sikhs and also that Sikhs “have held that the Udasi, that is, a religious recluse, is not of commendable faith”. This reference clearly applies to the followers of Sri Chand who were ascetic monks. The writer of Dabistan was in contact with various Sikhs of his time and also claims to have known the sixth and seventh gurus personally, thus his account of Sikh identity is certainly reliable.

If all textual sources on the Sikhs are examined, it becomes clear that a distinct Sikh identity did exist. Returning to Smith’s six foundations for ethnic identity, the Sikhs fulfil all the requirements. The community was collectively named the “Gursikhs”, they claimed spiritual ancestry from Nanak, they had historic memories in the form of stories about Nanak and other Gursikhs as illustrated by the narrations in the Vaars and Dabistan. The Sikhs shared a culture that included food taboos, common social practices, language, worship etc. In accordance with the need for a territory, the Sikhs were attached to a piece of territory i.e. the Punjab and specifically to various towns established by the gurus and specifically to Ramdasapur, which was celebrated as the Sikh capital. Finally, there certainly existed a sense of common solidarity that is noted by Bhai Gurdas and in Dabistan in that Sikhs were noted to always help each other and were welcome in each-other’s homes. Thus it is clear that the early Sikh community had a distinct identity which was by no means fluid. The early Sikhs were a separate community with distinct boundaries.

#### IV Sikh Identity from 1699 to the Mid 1700s

Perhaps the single most defining event in the formation of Sikh history was the establishing of the Khalsa in 1699. Numerous authors have questioned whether the Khalsa was truly given a rehit and external discipline as extensive as is seen in today's Khalsa, indicating that it is more likely that the Khalsa rehit was developing well into the 18th century. The rehitnama literature also does not codify the rehit in any exhaustive way. However the discovery of Bhatt Vehi or contemporary records of professional bards, sheds considerable light on the events of Baisakhi 1699. The Bhatt Vehi "Multani Sindhi Pargana Thanaysar" is described by Piara Singh Padam as the oldest account of this event:

"Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji, tenth Guru, son of Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji, in the year 1752 on Tuesday-the Vaisakhi day-gave Khande ki pahul to five Sikhs and surnamed them as Singhs. First Daya Ram Sopti, Khatri resident of Lahore stood up. Then Mohkam Chand Calico printer of Dawarka; Sahib Chand barber of Zafrabad city; Dharam Chand Jawanda Jat of Hastinapur; Himmat Chand water carrier of Jagannath stop up one after the other. All were dressed in blue and he himself also dressed the same way. Hookah, halaal, hajaamat, haraam, tikka, janeu, dhoti were prohibited. Socialisation with the descendants of Prithi Chand, followers of Dhirmal and Ram Rai, clean shaven people and Masands was prohibited. All were given Kangha, Karad, Kesgee, Karhaa, and Kacheraa. All were made Keshdhaaree. Everyone's place of birth was told to be Patna, of residence as Anandpur. Rest, Guru's deeds are known only to the Guru. Repeat Guru, the Guru will help everywhere"

This account leaves no doubt to the existence of the five kakaars (although not explicitly referred to as such) from the inception of the Khalsa nor ambiguity regarding the establishment of taboos and social boundaries and restrictions.

An accompanying question on the Khalsa, is whether it was defined as the only legitimate "Sikh" identity or if it was simply an option and non-Khalsa Nanak-Panthis could also claim to adhere to an equally legitimate form of Sikh identity. Sainapati, the writer of Gursobha in 1711, declared that "it was the wish of Gobind Singh that all Sikhs turn Khalsa." Similarly in the Amarnamah by Nathmal, a document appended to a copy of the Gursobha and dated October 8, 1708 the Guru "commanded the Sikhs to be courageous and to come to him for taking Amrit". It thus seems that Khalsa identity was indeed intended for all Sikhs and was not simply one amongst many possible identities they could assume.

The Sikh identity also became much more exclusive after the advent of the Khalsa. As written in the Bhatt Vehi, the Khalsa was forbidden from associating with Meenas, followers of Dhirmal, Masands, followers of Ram Rai etc. Almost all rehitnamas from Chaupa Singh to Daya Singh prohibit the Khalsa from associating with these heretic groups. Furthermore, the Khalsa is also marked as being a separate and unique faith. Guru Gobind Singh is recorded in the Amarnamah as saying "Do not even think of following the Hindu path. Always have faith in the Akal Purakh I worship"

Another interesting feature of the Khalsa, is the further development of rites de passage. Despite Oberoi's assertion that the Singh Sabha created unique life cycle rituals, old Sikh texts tell a much different story. The Amarnamah records that Sikh children should be administered Amrit at birth and again during mid-life and that "at the time of death, Amrit is a source of comfort". The Khalsa

rejects the Hindu custom of dying upon the ground and that "Sikhs must not do what the Brahmin commands...Sikhs should be ashamed of worshipping Brahmins..." The Bhai Daya Singh rehitnama insists that "[d]o not solemnise marriage without Anand marriage" Thus the Khalsa indeed had distinct life cycle rituals which continued the Sikh tradition of being independent from the Hindus.

An interesting question that arises, is regarding the status of the Sahajdharis in the Panth. Oberoi writes that "Sahajdhari Sikhs totally inverted Khalsa categories of thought and religious boundaries." But was the Sahajdhari identity considered an acceptable form of Sikh identity? The Bhagatratnavalee helps answer this question. The Bhagatratnavalee is a text attributed to Bhai Mani Singh but due to textual references to the Bhai in the third person is likely not by him. "The work may be dated between AD 1706....and AD 1737." The Bhagatratnavalee includes a conversation between the Sahajdharis and Guru Gobind Singh in which the Sahajdharis seem to differentiate between themselves and "Sikhs" or the Khalsa. The Sahajdharis allow that they are indeed not fully Sikhs and the Guru also encourages them to adopt Khalsa practices while acknowledging that they are not yet ready to abandon many Hindu customs. There are clear directions that the Sahajdharis should eventually embrace the Khalsa identity. When the Sahajdharis wonder what ceremonies to perform for their young sons who used to undergo the ritual shaving or Bhadun, Guru Gobind Singh orders "give Paahul to the sons of the Sahajdharis". The Sahajdharis are even told "those of you who are Sahajdhari Sikhs, if you can keep your form complete like the keshdharis, it is good" The Sahajdharis complain "At the time of weddings, we would call the Brahmins to read the Vedas and the hymns of marriage. Now the Sikhs say 'you should marry by reading the Anand, do not call the Brahmins.'" The Guru advises them to first do Ardass and the Anand, followed by whatever practices they followed previously. Subsequently the Sahajdharis say that the "Sikhs say now that the Vaheguru has revealed the Khalsa, you must not perform the ceremonies of the rest of the world". Discussions with the Guru address different issues including death rituals, the practice of Sharadh, bathing at the Ganges etc. Overall, the Sahajdharis complain that the "Sikhs" are telling them to abandon Hindu life rituals and the Guru in response attempts to slowly wean them away from the Hindus and towards the Khalsa. This account of the tension between the Khalsa and the Sahajdharis is also cited by Sainapati who writes that the "Khatris in particular were opposed to the injunction regarding keeping the hair uncut because ceremonially cutting of the hair was a part of their ceremonial practices" and that they largely opposed the Khalsa. Nonetheless, what is made clear in the Bhagatratnavalee is that the Sahajdharis were not considered to have a legitimate Sikh identity but "Sahajdhari" was a halfway house between Hindu and Sikh.

Although the dichotomy between Sahajdhari and Khalsa may have existed to some extent within the Panth, outside observers were very clear on who the Sikhs were: they were the Khalsa. Emperor Bahadur Shah's court records regarding the Sikhs note:

"Sikhs used to become Sikhs through the mediation of Masands...Guru Gobind Singh dismissed the Masands by one stroke of pen and established the Khalsa....Among the community of Khatris, a great disturbance occurred and marriage and kinships [between the Khalsa Sikhs and others] were given up"

Later, when the Sikhs under Banda Singh attacked the Punjab, the records read "The Sikhs of the Khalsa have established their authority in Sarhind and have decreed that no one should kill any animal."

When the Mughal rulers ordered the persecution of the Sikhs, the official orders read "to kill at

sight all the followers of Guru Nanak wherever they are found.” Indeed, this order was directed towards the Khalsa Sikhs, but they were simply referred to as the followers of Nanak.

The clearest association between Khalsa and Sikh can be found in the writings of Qazi Nur Muhammad who in 1764 wrote:

“the Sikhs are the disciples of a Guru and that fortunate Guide had lived at Chak. The ways and practices of these [people] are derived from Nanak who showed to the Sikhs a separate path. His [last] successor was Gobind Singh, from whom they received the title ‘Singh’. They are not from amongst the Hindus. These miscreants have a distinct religion of their own”

Thus it is clear that Khalsa identity was considered the true and complete expression of Sikh identity and was recognised as such by all Sikhs as well as outside observers.

## **V. Late 18th Century to the Singh Sabha.**

By the latter half of the 18th century, the Sikhs began to gain power over a large part of the Punjab. However, observers of the Sikhs now began to notice some heterogeneity: there now existed the Khalsa and the Khualasah. George Forester in 1783 notes that the Khualasahs form a sect amongst the Sikhs who “cut off the hair of their heads and beard and in their manners and appearance resemble the ordinary classes of Hindoos”. But even at that point, Forester notes that “I have been informed that matrimonial connections are occasionally formed between the Hindoos and Khualasah Sicques”. This would indicate that intermarriage between the Hindus and Sikhs, even amongst the non Khalsa Sikhs, was rare. Ghulam Ali Khan in his account of the Sikhs in 1808 also notes that the Khualasah exist but that they are much smaller in number and “of one thousand, or rather ten thousand persons, one can find only one or two persons who cut their hair.” Although the Khualasah only became apparent at this time, the term had existed much earlier. The term occurs in Sainapati’s Gursobha and refers to those who had “abandoned the Khalsa code of life” Thus the Khualasah seem to be a by-product of the persecution the Sikhs faced and refers to those who could not keep the Khalsa identity under such intense pressure: rather than being another type of Sikh, they were in fact “patit” or apostate Khalsas.

As the Sikh Kingdoms become established and Khalsa becomes the ruler of the Punjab, heterodoxy and diversity became more prevalent amongst the Sikhs. The now numerous Khualasah began to be referred to as “the disciples of Nanak” while the Khalsa were “those of Govind-singhu.” Accounts of Nanuku-shakhees, Nirvanees, Ukalees and Nimullus” became common. H.H. Wilson was able to even make a catalogue of “Nanak Shahis” which included the Udasis, Govind Sinhis and Suthra Shahis. The Khalsa themselves began “copying the ceremonies of the Hindoos” while ignoring previous dietary taboos on intoxicants and meat. The Sikhs were beginning to take part in “popular religion” as described by Oberoi: witchcraft, omens, sorcery, ancestor worship etc. “An integral part of Sikh sacred practices in nineteenth-century Punjab was the worship of the goddess Devi....Durga, Kali, Kalka, Mahesri” All these were clearly practices that the Sikhs had rejected and abandoned in the past, but now they again became common amongst them. Idols were installed the Golden Temple complex of Sikh Gurus and Hindu gods and lower caste Sikhs could visit the Golden Temple only at certain times of the day. Even reverence for the Guru Granth Sahib became lessened as “men from the body of guru lineages and other holy figures...occupied this hallowed position” The distinct religious identity of the Sikhs had eroded and the assimilation into Hinduism had begun. This was the setting for the revolutionary Singh Sabha movement.

## VI. Conclusions

By examining early Sikh identity in textual sources, it appears clear that the Sikhs were a distinct group with separate beliefs and practices and were recognised as such by outsiders and the Sikhs themselves. However, sometime in the late in the 18th century a process of identity dilution began to take place, to the extent that within 100 years, different types of Sikh identity became possible and the Khalsa tradition had been contaminated with many Hindu and rural Punjabi practices. The question of course is why this happened. I propose four factors which resulted in the dilution of Sikh Identity: 1) Loss of Sikh institutions due to persecution in the early 18th century 2) The advent of Sikh rule under the Misals; 3) Influx of converts; 4) Influence of village culture when Sikhs settled back into rural life.

The central Sikh institution has since the time of Guru Nanak been the Dharamsala. With the general persecution of Sikhs from the time of Banda Singh Bahadur until the latter part of the 18th century, the Dharamsalas had to be abandoned and the control fell into non-Khalsa hands. Udasis and Hindu devotees of the Gurus took control of the dharamsalas and “began to act independent of Panth and Panthic ideology and reverted to old Hindu religious practices.” Udasis “believed in the Vedas, the Puranas and the Shastras” and were even classified as a Hindu sect by Cunningham in his book History of the Sikhs. Sikh dharamsalas began to be operated in a fashion similar to Hindu temples with the treatment of Guru Granth Sahib as an idol, the actual installation of Hindu idols and restrictions on lower castes in worship. Even the celebration of Gurburabs was Hinduised with sharadhs being held in memory of the Gurus. When the Sikhs became rulers of the Punjab, the dharamsalas remained in the hands of non-Sikhs and thus rather than promoting true Sikh ideals, dharamsalas promoted a Vedantic and Hinduised mutation of Sikhism. The Akali movement in freeing the Gurdwaras and dharamsalas, was therefore an important step in reviving the Sikh tradition.

The second factor in the dilution of Sikh identity was the evolution of the Misal system and the rise of Sikh power in the Punjab. In 1769, Kesar Singh Chibbar wrote that with the rise of Sikh power, “in ten years all would be chaos and nothing left of the Sikh tradition in Punjab. Even the Adi Granth would disappear from circulation...Khalsa Sikhs had quickly turned their backs on the fundamental teachings of the Sikh gurus.” The rise of the Misals contributed to the formation of a new caste system within the Sikhs as different Misals needing to form unions to protect and increase territory began to appeal to caste as a unifying force. The majority of Misal heads were Jats, but other castes too were represented i.e. Ramgarhia, Kalals, etc. But because Jats were most numerous, they gained power over the Sikh Kingdoms and a new caste system was formed, which was not the same as the Hindu Varnashrama Dharma. Jats occupied the supreme position, followed by Ramgarhias, Khattris, and the Ramdasias and Mazahbis.

Another product of the rise of Sikh power was the creation of various sects within Sikhism. It became a good business decision to start a sect and open a “dera” or monastery in the Sikh Kingdoms. Because of state patronage, the number of Udasi monasteries increased from about 12 in the middle of the 18th century to over 250 in the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Most of these establishments received land or money grants from the state. The families of the Gurus also were patronised by the state i.e. the Sodhis, Bedis, Bhallas and Trehans. Amongst the various types of Sikhs listed by Oberoi, many are simply followers of different schools of Udasi thought i.e. Ajit Mallis, Guru Ditta Baba, Suthra Shaahee, etc. Others are followers of the Sodhis i.e. Barbhag Singh Guru. What is clear however, is that Khalsa identity was still the most common identity with the Sikh Kingdom itself being called “Sarkar-i-Khalsa” and the vast majority of Sikhs returning



themselves as Khalsa in the census of 1881. Thus, it is clear that state patronage by the Sikh Kingdoms facilitated the development of various types of Sikh identity.

A linked factor to the establishment of the Sikh Kingdoms is the influx of converts into Sikhism. Sita Ram Kohli had estimated the number of Khalsa Sikhs to be around 20000 in the middle of the 18th century. By the 1881 census, the population of Sikh had risen to 1.8 million. This was a direct result of mass conversion to Sikhism. It paid to be Sikh in a Sikh Kingdom. The new converts however were not dedicated to maintaining the faith nor many of the tenets. Malcolm in his Sketch of The Sikhs remarks how the new converts continue to follow the rituals of their old faith. Such mass influx was responsible for the revival of Hindu rituals and beliefs in Sikh society with life cycle rituals reverting to those of the Hindus.

The final factor in the dilution of Sikh identity was the immersion of Sikhs back into village culture. It was fairly easy to maintain a strong sense of identity and distinctiveness amongst the Sikhs when persecution forced them to live together in bands apart from village culture. Once the Sikh Kingdoms had been established, Sikhs returned to live in villages and many old caste and cultural customs were re-established. An example of this is the worship of ancestors. It is a common custom amongst Punjabis to worship ancestors and a British observer remarked that "[t]he worship of the sainted dead, though contrary to the injunctions of Gobind Singh, is universal among Jats, whether Sikhs, Sultanis or Hindus". Other Punjabi customs such as considering certain days sacred to the sun and others to the moon also became common. All such rituals had been condemned by the Gurus and noted as absent amongst the Sikhs by earlier observers; however immersion in village culture resulted in the weakening of Sikh identity.

Thus, this paper has argued that Sikhs had a well-defined and distinct identity into the middle of the 18th century but was at that point diluted. Khalsa identity has also been shown to have been the most common Sikh identity, and in fact synonymous with Sikh and "Nanak-Panthi". The Singh Sabha reformers did not re-invent the Sikh tradition: they simply revived it. Life cycle rituals that Oberoi describes as being innovations were recorded at the time of the Gurus and not elite creations. Pockets of Sikhs who followed the old traditions also existed in the late 19th century when much of the Sikh tradition had been diluted and boundaries lost. The dera of Baba Ajaipal Singh in Nabha has been recorded by Bhai Kahan Singh as a bastion of Khalsa ideals. It was in fact this dera that inspired the Namdhari movement. Macauliffe also records that "amid the general corruption of the religion of Gobind there are to be found about one hundred Sikhs at Naderh in the Dakhan, who are said to have up to present time preserved intact the faith". These Sikhs initiate Brahmins and Sudras into the Khalsa and "Brahmin weds Sudra and Sudra weds Brahmin". He also notes the rejection of Brahminism amongst these Sikhs. The Akhand Kirtanee Jatha of present times also compares well to the descriptions given of the original Sikhs.

The study of Sikh identity has often begun with only an in-depth study of the Sikh practices of the late 19th century. This is problematic. To achieve an understanding of Sikh identity, it is crucial to reflect upon older accounts from the time of the Gurus and also outsider descriptions of the Sikhs before the time of the Sikh Kingdoms. These accounts describe a community which is distinct in all ways from the Hindus with a separate way of life. The Singh Sabha movement thus cannot be considered simply as a result of elite instrumentalism but must be considered in the light of early evidence. Under such an analysis it becomes clear that the Sikh revival in the late 19th century was just that: a revival. Most certainly not a set of artificial innovations.

## **Annotated Bibliography**

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